the escapist

EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

"Just a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down in the most delightful way."

I recently watched Disney's timeless classic, *Mary Poppins*, from which the song "Spoonful of Sugar" hails. As a child, I thought the tune was very catchy and I liked the idea of medicine tasting like strawberry. As I've grown older, I understand the importance of finding fun in daily life, in things that, on the surface, seem to be no fun at all.

In today's world, we work and go to school longer hours than ever. We live farther from our daily activities, and consequently, have longer commutes. When we actually do get home, we then have to clean, cook and run errands. And once we finish all of this, is it time to rest and recreate? Often, no. Due to technology, we can be reached anywhere at any time, so if something breaks at work, a client needs something ASAP or a last minute editorial clarification is required, cell phones, email and instant messenger are ready to "save the day."

With all of these pulls on our time, it is very hard to find time for fun with family, friends or even alone. Is it any wonder that games are beginning to show up in the strangest of places, like on our cell phones or advertisements? Or coming from a different angle, that people are beginning to have entire social networks through games, rather than "real life"? Is it a surprise at all that we are still looking for our spoonful of sugar 41 years later?

This week's issue of *The Escapist*, "The Home Invasion," addresses this phenomenon in our lives in two ways. First, we are introducing some sweet expansions into the universe of *The Escapist*. Check back this Friday for the first of our additions, and a chance for us to get to know each other better. Second, our writers this week expand the idea, from Allen Varney's introduction of a new currency for our harried lifestyle, to Mark Wallace's discussion of the new leisure class. Enjoy this week's issue of *The Escapist* and then maybe "let's go fly a kite…"

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: I read your article on gaming as a family and now I know that I am not alone. My husband and I have a guild in *World of Warcraft* that our children (eight and six) belong to. When we are not able to play with the kids, then other members of our guild play with them. We have the children of other members guilded as well, and take pride in the fact that we are a very family oriented guild. My son learned to read by the age of four without stepping foot in a classroom through online and console gaming. My daughter gets help with math and reading as we browse the auction house for an item she likes. Their enjoyment of the game gives me a great bargaining tool for enforcing other house rules with homework, chores and ensuring active, outside play.

I have read your magazine for a while now and look forward to each issue. You comment on and highlight often ignored topics on other gaming sites, for that I am grateful. There is more to the gaming world than "leet" gear and I applaud you for bringing that face of the gaming enterprise to light.

Katherine M.

To the Editor: While Allen's article was interesting, I found it a strong argument for not allowing dual-gamer couples to breed. Apparently, mental retardation (in the parents, not the kids) is the result. Where are those parents' brains?

Feeding their 12-, nine- and three-year-olds Cokes? Letting them stay up until 9 p.m. playing totally inappropriate games? Letting them play *WoW* unsupervised, except to tell imaginary guild friends that the kids are online alone and to watch out for them? Playing *Halo* and *Battlefield Vietnam* with a six- and three-year-old? I don't know if this level of stupidity qualifies as child abuse, but it's close. I hope local Child Services organizations start paying regular visits to those households.

Some combinations of people should be sterilized when they get married, as they don't have the combined common sense to do a decent job of raising children.

Disgusted

To the Editor: [Re: "The Third Generation"] The article is going in the right direction, but misses one important point: The average working male doesn't have the time anymore. Games get more and more sophisticated, and difficulty levels are upped so that the teens and students get some buck for the money. While during that time in my life I spent most of my time solving LucasArts Adventures (from 4 p.m. to late at night), nowadays (being forced to do quality time, and enjoying it, with the family and increased hours spent at work), all I have is an odd hour round midnight.

So, no *WoW* or *Call Of Duty*, but something simple like a race game (but not *Wipeout Pure*) or a kids game is all that will do. Boss Fights like Krauser in *Resident Evil 4* finally put a stop to my excursions. Unless the consoles take this into considerations and re-insert cheats for these situations, all I will do is not buy them. If a review says 'Too simple, you'll be through in 20 hours,' now that's a candidate!

I am looking forward to the NextGen of graphics, but there is a strong argument for jump points, multiple difficulty levels and a KI that lowers requirements when it sees you're not up for it. And if I get a different ending or less goodies: so what? At least I got one...

Andreas

To the Editor: I would like to comment on "Real World Grief" by Allen Varney in issue 19. The first sentence runs: "Individualist anarchism, a political philosophy hundreds of years old, has now been conclusively discredited by massively multiplayer online games."

In my mind, it is more feasible to have it run like this: "Individualist anarchism, a political philosophy hundreds of years old, has **until now** been conclusively found to **not work** in **current** massively multiplayer online games." I agree that the new sentence is a bit awkward, but it helps me in identifying the main components, which stop anarchism from working in current games.

The first ingredient to the tincture is the players itself. Human beings are a curious mix of genes and upbringing, and science is not certain so far which one has the greater effect. A mind brought up on violence and having learned to associate violence with pleasure, will crave that form of gratification, and not another. So, when we talk about people not being able to live in an anarchistic, peaceful, self governed, mutual respect governed society, we need to keep in mind that we are talking about **current** people.

The second ingredient of our analysis is the games themselves. If you look at the current assortment of games, most are built on competition, which is no wonder as they are built within the boundaries of our current culture. Their rules, their environment, their system of rewarding and punishing the player is not built on anarchist principles, so it is not much wonder that anarchism will plainly not work.

Additionally, the virtual world also has some specifics, the real world lacks, namely a higher degree of anonymity, a higher predominance of short term goals and needs, and a lack of data from sensory channels. The visual channel is available, but only gives us substitute images, which programmers and artist put into the game. You cannot see that someone is lying to you from the face of his avatar, you often **can** see it in real life. Or maybe not see, maybe hear ... or maybe sense it. Studies show that a validity of someone's communication is determined by nonverbal behavior by 90%, which means that when presented with contradicting meanings we rely on our senses and not on the content of the message which is presented to us for evaluating.

Maxim

Game Design in the Transfigured World

In the next two centuries, roleplaying ideas will transform society. Game designers can help.

by Allen Varney

The Argument

• In the imminent world of fast-constant-ubiquitous net, new reputation economies will pervasively reshape culture as dramatically as the invention of money. Entirely novel kinds of human interaction will spawn new social classes, power structures and lifestyles. Reputation economies will be abstractions of relationships, in the same way that money abstracts material wealth and labor.

• In this context, reputation economies will benefit from simulations originally developed for electronic and tabletop roleplaying games.

• Who can engineer this new social institution? The people with the most appropriate skill set: game designers.

Always On

Node, a company in the Welsh town of Usk, makes the Node Explorer:

This is a robust location aware media player - a small hand held computer with stereo headphones, which downloads relevant information from a server, guiding the user via GPS (Global Positioning System) as they walk around their environment. The Explorer's integrated location sensors and hidden wireless technology are able to pinpoint the exact location of its user, triggering high quality images and broadcast quality sound and video, in the form most suitable, such as language, age group, and particular interest or special needs.

Museums and sports consortia are buying Node Explorers right now. Can anyone doubt that in a few years we'll have gadgets like this in cell phones? First, we'll use them as automated tour guides, or color commentary on big events. But eventually, someone will stop pointing his phone at the Sistine Chapel ceiling or the World Cup final, and start pointing it at you. What will he get? Your home page or Livejournal profile? Maybe at first, but what about another ten years on, or twenty? What about your great-grandkids, a hundred years on?

Once we get true ubiquitous computing, when we're perpetually (un)wired, we'll gradually develop instant access to every public fact about everybody. Online World will meet Meat World. A stranger on the street will ask you to loan him $20, and you'll actually **seriously consider his request**. Why? Because you can see his name and address. More importantly, you can ping his whole social network and see how many of those who trust him are people you

trust, or are trusted by people who are trusted by people you trust…

We'll all be living the Kevin Bacon Game, instantly sussing all six degrees of separation from anyone we meet. Your standing with your immediate group of friends will remain important, but that social connection will extend powerfully to their friends, and their friends of friends. Among people who know you, you'll still have a reputation; but in the larger world, you'll have a **simulated** reputation.

What is a "simulated reputation"? It's how people judge you if they've never heard of you. It's your clan rank, forum karma, eBay feedback rating. It's the size of your MySpace personal network and the strength of your *World of Warcraft* guild, but interoperating with and transferable to every other network. Simulated reputation generalizes from recognized institutions like military rank, knighthoods, titles and Who's Who listings - some particular organization's badge of approval. What if no organization handed out the badges? What if you made your own badges? Glory, brownie points, hacker leetness, street cred - Cory Doctorow's 2003

science fiction novel, *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, calls it "Whuffie," a term he used in high school.

From the prologue: "Whuffie recaptured the true essence of money: In the old days, if you were broke but respected, you wouldn't starve; contrariwise, if you were rich and hated, no sum could buy you security and peace. By measuring the thing that money really represented - your personal capital with your friends and neighbors - you more accurately gauged your success."

Doctorow's novel doesn't deeply analyze the tech his Whuffie requires (what the book's narrator calls "that process stuff"). The book doesn't discuss who devises the rules by which people earn reputation - who keeps the system from being gamed to oblivion - who has the greatest experience in reputation simulation.

That would be game designers.

The Simulated Age
Simulation is the abstract modeling of real objects, phenomena, events or relationships. Practiced for centuries in warfare, simulation entered the wider

culture with the arrival of practical computing; it first transformed science and economics, then aviation and other engineering disciplines. Simulation hit pop culture in the 1960s via hobbyist board and miniature wargames, and later in *Dungeons & Dragons* and thousands of tabletop and computer roleplaying games (RPGs).

Those who equate simulation with, say, flight simulators may not see how RPGs fit the definition. But every RPG tries to depict character abilities in a believable way, either realistically or according to the implicit rules of a fiction genre (fantasy, superheroes, space opera, cartoons, etc.). Most RPGs simulate combat in detail, and many also model skills, devices, vehicles and environmental effects. Some notable paper games quantify sanity (*Call of Cthulhu*), culturally conditioned personality traits (*Pendragon*), inter-character relationships like trust (*The Mountain Witch*) and romance (*Breaking the Ice*), and the willful escalation of conflict from words to violence (*Dogs in the Vineyard*), among many other interactions. In fact, paper and computer RPGs comprise the most comprehensive

and finely grained body of simulations in the world.

The field's broad range indicates the strength of simulation. If you can quantify fear and anger, trust and distrust, romance and hatred, what human relationship can you not model? And having quantified these relationships, why not tackle the big one, the killer app, that fundamental instrument of social order? Why not simulate reputation?

The skills designers use to create roleplaying games are the same skills they'll use to devise reputation simulations.

Utility-Scale Simulation
The reputation economy is a disruptive innovation, like steam engines, cars, containerized shipping, personal computers and - the closest parallel - money. Developed 3,000 years ago, money has transformed the entire world, thoroughly and repeatedly. Like simulation, money is a deep idea; we keep gaining new insights about it, century after century.

Money is an abstraction, a tracking score for promises; it doesn't exist, yet people organize their lives around it. Money has not conquered the world, but seduced it. Unlike failed ideas such as communism, everyone buys into the idea of money because they see its benefit to them personally. Similarly, over generations, everyone will buy into a reputation economy. Its benefit becomes obvious to anyone who tries to, say, borrow $20 from a stranger.

The reputation economy will arise first in Earth's most heavily networked population, the communication industry's

lab rat, South Korea. In North America, megacorporations will probably introduce the idea unwittingly, as part of corporate-sponsored online "lifegames" that reward real-world consumer loyalty with virtual-world advancement, and vice versa. Consumers will earn status in these proprietary games, using systems created by game designers; players will conduct business and earn real money, proving the value of such status. Inevitably, hackers will create some open source file format, the future equivalent of today's XML schema, to allow easy interchange of reputation across multiple games.

Money has not conquered the world, but seduced it.

After decades, nations will start to treat their citizens' standards-based electronic reputation as a basic human right, the way some today advocate that broadband should be a utility like power and water. Legislatures may create government bureaus to regulate and protect reputation-granting companies. Then, international bodies will regulate the bureaus, a la the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Game designers - rather, reputation designers - might be licensed like accountants and lawyers.

It's not utopia. Reputation systems could mean the death of privacy, as if it weren't already coughing up blood. Transnational clans, cliques, and cults, united by mutual regard or loathing for a common enemy, might make high school look as egalitarian as an AA meeting. Imagine walking down a quiet suburban street, oblivious that all around you a silent war is raging in cyberspace, bank accounts being emptied, reputations destroyed...

But reputation need not doom privacy or enflame rivalries. These are design issues. All these problems require a lot of good thinking by the people best skilled in simulation.

The Catbird Seat

Designers who read this may think, "Yeah, whatever. Is there any way to make money off this right now?" Not quite yet, though they can look for a nice living in five to fifteen years (while at least one entrepreneur, some czar of the reputation industry, will earn a Michael Dell-sized fortune). Yet, to ask how to make money off reputation is to miss the point. Reputation will become a goal in itself, both parallel and equal to money. And the designers who engineer its systems will be best situated to earn it.

True story: A major national department store chain has a three-ring binder in the credit department of each of its stores. The binder lists the occupations considered most desirable among credit-card applicants; the higher an occupation's score, the more likely it is the store will give credit to an applicant with that job. The binder lists "Writer" as one of the most desirable occupations. Now, most writers are terrible credit risks. Why, then, the high rating? Because the binder's text was recorded by - right! - a writer.

But let us conclude on a more elevated note. The game designer today occupies a nebulous social role, a mutant cross of technician, scenarist, entertainer, architect and sometimes even artist. The upcoming reputation economy offers ambitious designers a larger sphere, a chance to change the world and eventually transform the lives of millions. If you're up for it, start planning. ▤

Allen Varney is a writer and game designer based in Austin, Texas. This essay derives from his Guest of Honor speech at the Consternation gaming convention (Cambridge, UK), August 13, 2005.
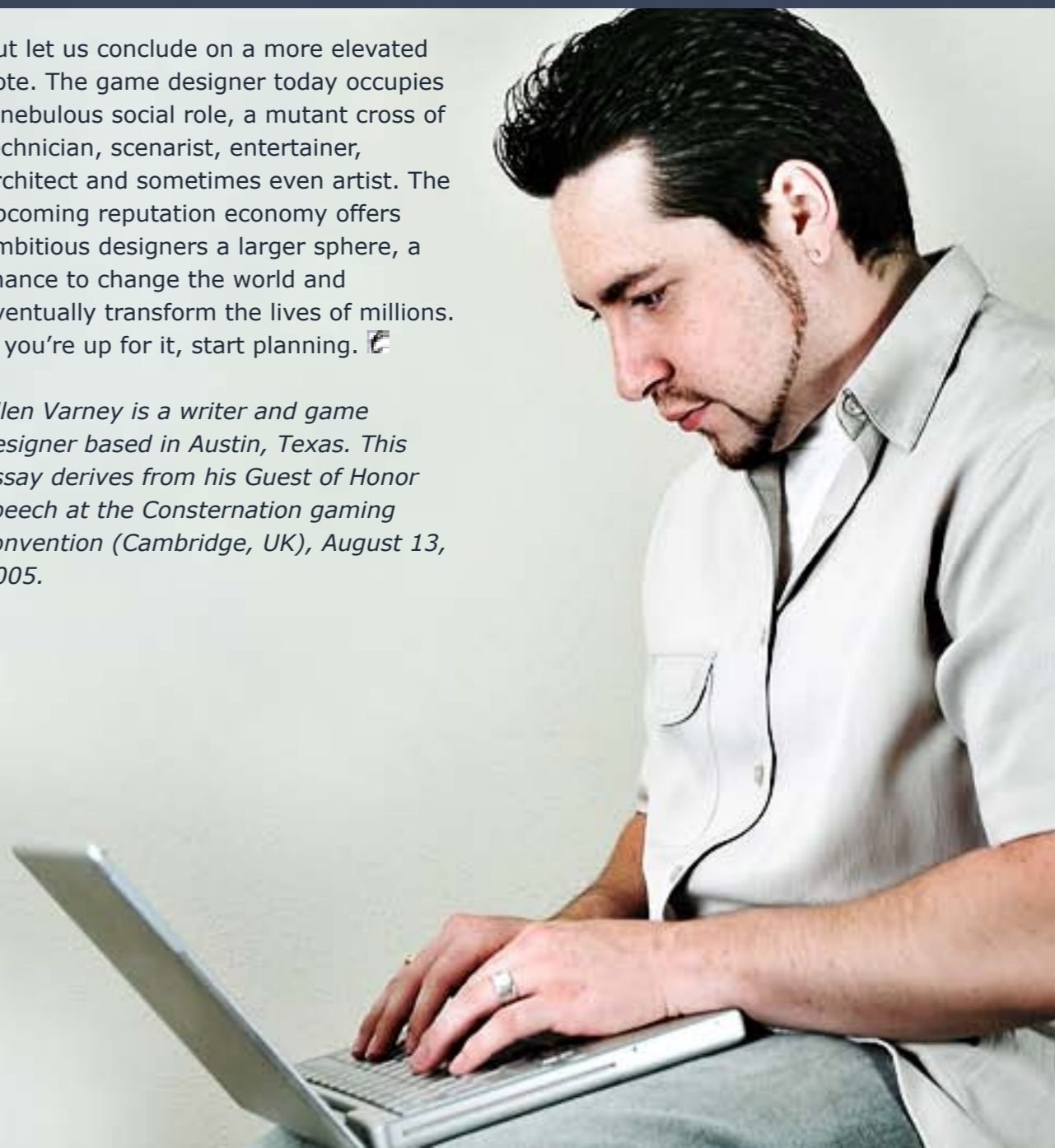
Theory of the Gaming Class

by Mark Wallace

The institution of a gaming class is found in its best development at the higher stages of the barbarian culture. The upper classes are by custom exempt or excluded from industrial occupations, and are reserved for certain employments to which a degree of honour attaches. Chief among the honourable employments ... is warfare; and priestly service is commonly second to warfare. ...This exemption is the economic expression of their superior rank.

So wrote economist Thorstein Veblen, more than 100 years ago. Except that he wasn't actually writing about gamers, as presciently accurate as he may sound today. The passage above is actually the first few sentences of Veblen's most famous work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* - except for the word "gaming" that somehow snuck in to replace the word "leisure" in the first sentence.

Published in 1899, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* was a scathing economic and social critique of America's habits of leisure, luxury and, to use the phrase Veblen coined, "conspicuous consumption." Though much of it is unreasonably harsh, Veblen's basic observations are no less salient today than a hundred years ago. If Veblen is to be believed, though, the fall of Western civilization is at hand - and it just may be gamers who are going to pull it down.

Veblen held that most of the economic activity that goes on in a modern society is little more than an effort by individuals to distinguish themselves from one another, specifically by demonstrating how much more luxury each one of us enjoys than the next. Society moves forward in a constant game of one-upmanship: When everyone can afford a Lexus, I've got to work that much harder in order to buy my Mercedes. I need the Mercedes as a way to differentiate myself from the masses; God forbid I should simply drive the same car as everyone else.

"Conspicuous leisure," another Veblen coinage, works the same way. The leisure class consists of people who have lots of time to waste on activities that don't specifically produce the kind of staples needed to survive. "Abstention from labour . . . comes to be a requisite of decency," Veblen wrote. Work is for the plebes. Clearly (to Veblen, at least), the fact that I have enough free time to level my *World of Warcraft* toon to 60 in only four months means that I occupy a higher station in society than the people who spend most of a year getting to the endgame - even though we've all "/played" the same 500 hours to get there. In this case, I belong to what we might call the "gaming class."

Of course, Veblen had his detractors, including the famously acerbic literary critic H.L. Mencken, who wasn't at all convinced that the only reason we enjoy our luxuries is to set ourselves apart from those who can't. To Mencken, leisure was valuable in and of itself:

"Do I enjoy a decent bath because I know that John Smith cannot afford one - or because I delight in being clean? Do I admire Beethoven's Fifth Symphony because it is incomprehensible to

Congressmen and Methodists-or because I genuinely love music? ... Do I prefer kissing a pretty girl to kissing a charwoman because even a janitor may kiss a charwoman - or because the pretty girl looks better, smells better and kisses better?"

Gamers might ask themselves similar questions. Do I dig those Flying Tiger Goggles because I need the +4 stamina and spirit, or because they make me look sharper than all the other Undead rogues out there? Which is a better two-handed sword, the Truesilver Champion, with its holy shield, or the Warmonger, because it's so much cooler looking?

The fact is, we make a lot of our gaming choices based not on whether they help us get ahead in the game, but as a way to mark ourselves as different - usually better - than the "noobsticks" who are always getting in our way. MMOGs especially are great places to see the kinds of distinctions at work that Veblen had in mind. What level 40 character in *WoW*, having just saddled up his first steed, isn't gripped by more than a twinge of envy when that 60 warrior rides by on her flaming-hoofed epic mount?

Games, after all, are designed for this kind of thing; they're competitive spaces where a large part of the point is claw your way to the top - and make sure everyone knows that you have. Easy "pwnage" isn't the only reason uber weapons are desirable. Even if you've never made it halfway through a high-level instance, the rare item you like to flash in front of the Ironforge auction house says, "I'm uber and you're not." Imagine for a moment an Azeroth in which every sword and shield, every weapon, every piece of armor, and every item of clothing looked exactly the same. You'd still try to get your hands on Typhoon as soon as you could, but I can guarantee you it wouldn't be as exciting. Game companies are well aware of this - which is why your epic mount has flaming hooves in the first place: it's not enough to **be** uber, you have to **look** uber too.

The one-upmanship of gaming extends outside the realm of any individual game, as well. If you want evidence of a gaming class, look no further than Jonathan "Fatal1ty" Wendell and the rise of competitive gaming. Microsoft has now brought us a tool that anyone can use to distinguish themselves from their

lesser peers, with the introduction of their Xbox Live service. Just beating Painkiller isn't the point; now it's where you rank on your favorite Painkiller server. It's almost as if there's no such thing as a single-player game anymore; no matter what you play, you're not just playing against the AI, you're playing against the background of all the other gamers out there who are playing the same game - and mostly you're coming up short.

The gaming class values such distinctions even outside the realm of play. You can see it in the premium we place on information. The two favorite words of gaming news sites and magazines are "exclusive preview" - even if all they're really showing you is a couple of stills from a trailer that has nothing to do with the actual gameplay. Knowing something no one else knows yet is what's important. Who really cares if that knowledge is in fact useless, or even wrong?

This was Veblen's beef with conspicuous consumption: It led us down a path of darkness, at the end of which "useful" work became "odious" and waste became a badge of honor. But if today's

gamers are lucky, that's exactly where society is headed - and as I said earlier, gamers will be the ones to take it there.

The fact that we have time to waste in gaming marks us as proud members of the gaming class. Like being a member of Veblen's leisure class, this is what marks us as standing apart from the unwashed masses. This is how we know we're cool. And Veblen as much as predicted the rise of the gaming class as standing apart from the rest. In feudal Europe, it was the fact that I didn't have to toil in the fields and could spend my time in more "honourable employments," such as warfare. Back then, it was the lords and knights who were the "in crowd." Doing combat was a luxury. (*A Knight's Tale*, anyone?) The only difference between then and now is that these days the in crowd fights battles that take place on a computer screen.

Of course, the rest of the world hasn't yet figured out the fact that gamers are the new leisure class, but it's only a matter of time. Our moment hasn't quite arrived yet, but it's right around the corner. We already have our own swell parties and exclusive industry events, it's just that no one cares but us gamers for

the moment. But that's already changing. Right now, gaming is on the cusp of a mainstream apotheosis that will make gamedevs and the uber geeks among us as cool as the dot-com boomers were in the late 1990s, as flashy as indie filmmakers were earlier in the same decade, as sought-after as the modern artists of the 1970s and as hip as the rockers of 1960s.

Soon enough, games will be the single most culturally important entertainment medium out there, the yardstick by which we measure our leisure time - and thus our station in society. When that happens, all your cool will belong to us.

Are you ready? Say it with me: **Muwahahahahaaa**.

Mark Wallace can be found on the web at Walkering.com. His book with Peter Ludlow, Only A Game: Online Worlds and the Virtual Journalist Who Knew Too Much, will be published by O'Reilly in 2006.

"VIDEO GAMES, PORNOGRAPHY, & the Question of Interactivity"

by Bonnie Ruberg

Over the last few months, the world has had a lot of things to say on the topic of sex and games, some of it good and some of it bad. At first, there was the "Hot Coffee" incident, which arose after secret sexual content was discovered in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. That, of course, facilitated the further rise of lawyer and anti-gamer, Jack Thompson, whose starkly conservative views on sexual content earned him public attention well after the scandal had passed. Close behind came a wave of attempts at game-related legislation, which stressed the sex-related concerns of politicians and parents over in-game violence.

At the same time, the gamer home front has been fighting back by shining a constructive light on the issue of sex in games. The International Game Developers Association formed a Sex Special Interest Group under experienced industry-worker Brenda Brathwaite. And developers gave the topic serious thought during the Sex in Games panel at the Women's Game Conference this October in Austin.

All this newfound publicity has begun to change the way the video game community views sexual content. Now, more than ever, we're starting to recognize that sex isn't just an underbelly, a niche market or a footnote in the gaming universe. Sex, in one form or another, permeates all videogame genres. It's an important part of human relations, of life, of storytelling, and as such, it's an important part of games.

Even sexual content has undergone something of a revolution, sparked by technological innovation and the ever-growing availability of high-speed internet connections. Online sex games seem more plentiful now than ever. Plus, the overwhelming popularity of many massively multiplayer online games - from *World of Warcraft* to *Second Life* to *Sociolotron* - has encouraged sexual interaction between players in a whole new way, and on a whole new scale. MMOG sex itself can be broken down into numerous subcategories and subcultures. It has even spawned a unique type of pornography, generated and sold in game.

Twenty years ago, sex in videogames was simple. The options were minimal. You dodged arrows, and to celebrate, you had your way with a Native American girl tied up against a cactus. No one asked whether you'd prefer missionary or doggy style, whether you swung toward hardcore, vanilla or maybe even furry. Technology restricted sexual content, and we were left with a generic fantasy. But both technology and sexual content have come a long way since *Custer's Revenge*. And as the medium becomes more intricate and more varied, the implications of sex in games become more and more complex.

Whether you love or hate sexual content in games, the fact of the matter remains: It raises some interesting questions. The big one on everyone's minds, it seems, is the question of morality.

Anti-game activists claim videogames are a bad influence, that they inspire trouble. Pro-game thinkers, on the other hand, believe that games are actually a good influence, that they have meaningful, constructive value. A lot of heated debate has passed between the two camps, and a good deal of time and energy has been spent fighting against, and conversely justifying, the inclusion of sexual material in games. People on both sides are anxious. Whatever we'd like to believe about overcoming our animal instincts, sex still has power in our culture. The question is, who will use it, and to what end?

Plenty of sexual content walks the fine line between thought-provoking and vulgar.

What if children are exposed to hardcore content? What if parents decide to take a backseat role in selecting appropriate games? We need a moral code. People shouldn't be allowed to conduct themselves willy-nilly. Right?

The problem is, at its heart, sex in games isn't a question of morals. Bogged down in the rhetoric of "good" and "bad," we often overlook the issue of artistic license. Videogames are a form of art, and sexual content is therefore a manner of expression, one that's neither good nor bad.

Having accepted this, we can begin to explore sex in games as a social puzzle, not a moral one. Even if we, as a gaming community, are still unwilling to consider sex games art, that shouldn't stop us from analyzing them. Consider pornography, an entertainment medium arguably as morally ambiguous as they come. But that doesn't stop us from trying to understand it, and from that understanding glean information about ourselves as viewers.

The comparison between pornography and videogames isn't a random one. Plenty of sexual content walks the fine line between the thought-provoking and vulgar. It begs the question: Is there a difference between in-game sex and pornography? That, of course, depends on how we define porn. The most obvious definition, the dictionary definition, points out its blatant sexual energy and its ability to arouse. Yet, as keynote speaker Adam Singer pointed out at the Edinburgh Interactive Entertainment Festival this past August, all successful art has an element of the erotic, and the power to arouse. Certainly, plenty of sex games include so much shameless nudity and kinky pretense that they seem to overstep the "element of the erotic" and enter the world of straight porn. But where can you draw the line? Can graphic sex never be artistic? We can accept the necessity

of nudity when we see it in art. We can accept the necessity of sex when we see it in romance.

What can pornography possibly have that makes it so different? Why do we label pornography those things which, in other contexts, are normal parts of life?

The answer is this: What really differentiates porn from other representations of sex is that it's innately one-sided. It lacks an interactive dialectic. Consider a somewhat old-fashioned scenario. A man goes to a video store. There, he buys a tape promising "Hot Lesbian Action." He takes the tapes home, sticks it in his VCR, and watches it. It arouses him. This has been, so to speak, a totally masturbatory encounter. That's to say, no one else has been involved but him. Though our lesbian-lover has had a sexual experience, no other subjective being has experienced it with him. The object he purchased has affected him; he has affected no one. Actual sex necessitates two subjects, two real people engaged in a dialogue - who, for better or for worse, influence one another. Porn, on the other hand, is literally an objectification. It

literally negates the existence of a second active subject. It singularizes sex. It makes desire a closed circuit.

When videogames enter the equation, however, something totally new comes to the table: interactivity.

Of course, sometimes sexual content in games is non-playable, like the purchasable strip tease in *Indigo Prophecy*. This sort of material faces the same dilemma as run-of-the-mill pornography: namely, can you rectify the objectification in porn by creating a meaningful dialogue between the work and the viewer - or is the sexuality gratuitous, and therefore artistically useless?

Introducing playable sex material into the mix, however, really makes things interesting. Why? Because interactive sex shatters the mold of pornography; it creates a dialogue. Consider once more our friend who trekked all the way to the store for his tape. It's still pleasure he's after, but now he has the internet. Instead of watching porn, he plays a simple simulator game. In this game (not safe for work), he's able to

manipulate an animated woman, to unclothe her, touch her, and eventually bring her to orgasm. At first, such a game seems like a blatant candidate for the porn bin. As before, there's only one actual human subject. Only one person is having a good time. Only one person is playing. So, there is again an objectification - perhaps even more so this time, since the female objects of desire who were previously shielded by the unchangeable thing-hood of a pre-recorded tape, can now, through manipulation and subservience, be fully turned into objects.

Unlike before, though, there is a dialectic here, a certain give and take. The man loads the game, and he clicks. In response, the girl's underwear is removed. In response, he becomes more aroused. In response, he clicks again, so that the girl moves the arm that covered her breasts. In response, he becomes even more aroused, inciting him to use his mouse to stimulate her sexually. This dialogue could go on indefinitely. Or, at least, until one of them - the real life man or the virtual woman - reaches climax. And since the goal of the game is to make the girl orgasm, she has even

more authoritative agency; her fulfillment stops the game.

So, is this game pornographic, or isn't it? It offers subjectivity, but that subjectivity is preprogrammed. Does sex need a dialogue of emotion, not just action, to raise it above the level of porn?

Some games complicate the sexual dynamic even further by turning interactivity on its head and directly affecting **you**. Most do this through peripherals - items like the Trans Vibrator, or any number of specially-designed videogame sex toys (not safe for work) - which impact you physically depending on how you play the game. They react to you; you react to them. Again, there's a cycle. As always though, it's a cycle with only one real subject who can feel pleasure. It's a dialogue with yourself. In this light, even the most interactive sexual content is just a complicated, disassociated form of masturbation. Really, all games face these questions of dialogue and one-sided interactivity, whether or not they offer traditional sexual content. Developers often respond in similar ways, with less controversial, reverse-interactive peripherals - like controllers

with rumble packs. Perhaps not surprisingly, such controllers are frequently converted into - or at least joked about as - outright sex toys.

As if the issue weren't confusing enough with one-player sex games, the implications go haywire when sexual interactivity involved more than one person. When MMOG players engage in sex, for example, they really are forming a human dialogue. There are at least two people involved, even if they are mediated by computer screens. So, are these interactions wholly non-pornographic?

Everyone experiences sex differently. For sure, many MMOG sex participants are engaging in emotionally meaningful sexual encounters. Yet it seems that - even when the sex is between two people who are equally involved in real life - there persists something of the pornographic. There is still a divide breeching the dialogue, leaving us, when all is said and done, alone with ourselves.

Online sex, in any form, allows both subjects to remain, to a certain extent, emotionally and physically separate.

Even as developers strive to make online sex as realistic as possible, the fact remains: It's not real. That is not to say that online sex is "good" or "bad," or "better" or "worse" than real life sex. It fills a different purpose. Nor is the title of "pornography" meant as a negative one. Pornography fills a specific, legitimate human need, one we rarely confront with our heads held high.

If our interest in sex in games is so normal, why does it illicit so much shock and titillation? Perhaps it's because sexual interactivity treads on the toes of our accepted understanding of both sexuality and game. It shows us how each defies the boundaries of the other. As a society, we've tried to mask the power of sex by compartmentalizing it, by telling it what it can and cannot be. In truth, we have done the same for videogames, whose true power to reflect and reveal the human condition is overwhelming in its enormity.

In knocking down these restraints, sexual games have both excited us and caught us off our guard. They let loose the floodgates of unease that comes in the wake of classification's dismissal. They unearth the profound
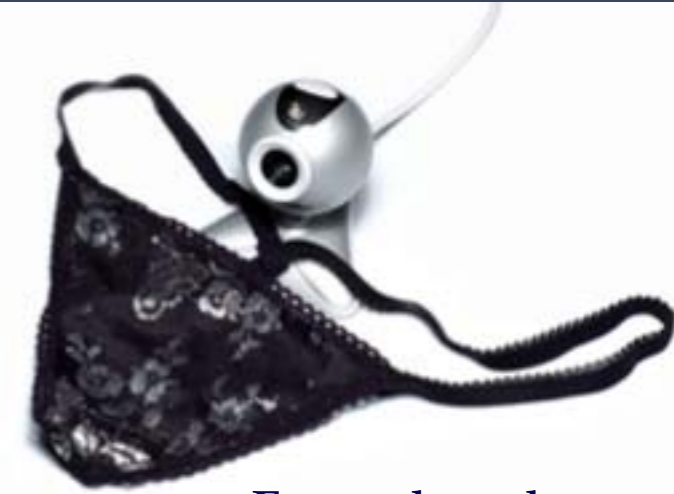
> Even when the sex is between two people who are equally involved in real life, there persists something of the pornographic.

anxiety that lies at the heart of our technological age. ▣

Bonnie Ruberg is a video game journalist specializing in gender and sexuality in games and gaming communities. She also runs a blog, Heroine Sheik, dedicated to such issues. Most recently, her work has appeared at The A.V. Club, Gamasutra, and Slashdot Games.

gaming for Grades

by Jon Wood

The following is a sentence that no one is likely to have heard before: "Jimmy, your homework for this week is to finish playing *Neverwinter Nights* and be prepared to talk about it on Monday." To many, this request would seem odd and out of place, especially coming out of the mouth of a high school teacher. Simply put, videogames are not fit for use in the classroom.

Or are they? Not so many years ago, the answer would have been "no." Today however, with changing technologies and attitudes, the answer can be a resounding "yes." When I was earning my Bachelor of Education degree, I learned a number of things, the first and foremost was that the classroom is changing.

The kids, the material and the technology in the classroom are all evolving. This is leading teachers to alter their styles and approaches. Classrooms need no longer be places of dusty text books and chalkboards. Instead, the presence of TVs, DVD players, LCD Projectors and computers all contribute to making the classroom a more effective and interesting environment. This environment is meant to appeal to students who live in a digital world and rely on their computers for everything from entertainment to communication.

These changes are forcing teachers to reevaluate their teaching strategies. While some teachers resist this change and continue to teach using chalkboards and film strips, others are moving right along with the times. Chalkboards and overhead projectors have been replaced by PowerPoint presentations, film strips have been replaced by videos, DVDs and movies. Even traditional morning announcements are moving toward a video format more reminiscent of the evening news than the scratchy-sounding voice of the principal, projected from an old loudspeaker. Students are getting a more interactive and media-driven experience. The trick for teachers lies in trying to evaluate the educational benefit of introducing these new technologies into the classroom.

In the proper context, videogames can be used as teaching tools in almost any subject area. It is the stigma that is attached to videogames that has kept them out of the classroom for this long. For a long time, computer and console games have been largely viewed as an entertaining waste of time. On the surface, that might even be true.

However, if you look a little bit deeper, there is a great deal of benefit to be found.

First, and most obviously, is the substantial amount of games that are educationally motivated. These are games that were created to teach. I remember that the first game ever to show up in my classroom was in 1991. *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?* was a successful game, that created the foundation for a very strong franchise. Players followed historical and geographical clues in order to track down the elusive criminal. The benefit for the classroom was obvious. The value of the educational genre of games has never been in question. It is the value of other games, games which were not developed with learning in mind that concerns me.

In the proper context, videogames can be used as teaching tools in almost any subject area.

Games that don't carry an overtly educational message are almost entirely overlooked by educators, and that is the problem. Games like *Knights of the Old Republic*, *Neverwinter Nights*, *Sid Meier's Civilization* and *Age of Empires*, all games that were created solely for entertainment purposes, have a place in the classroom alongside the *Carmen Sandiegos* of the gaming world. The trick is to prove to teachers, students, administrators, politicians and parents that there is a benefit to using these games as classroom tools.

In almost any English classroom, teachers will guide students through the sometimes complicated world of storytelling. It might be something relatively simple like plot structure (beginning, middle and end), or something more complex like genre or voice. Using games, teachers could enhance a student's understanding of any of these, or a hundred other terms that come up in the study of English Literature. No one is trying to argue that

books should be replaced in the classroom by their videogame counterparts. Books are the foundation of an English program and still belong there.

Despite Egon Spengler's assertion in 1984's *Ghostbusters* that print is dead, books continue to be published, produced and studied. Some time ago, however, it was decided that films could be used in the English classroom as a companion to the more traditional books. It started out with students watching "movie versions" of the books that they read in class, and moved on to watching films and analyzing them as their own separate pieces of fiction, using terms and techniques that were learned in class and applying them to the movie. "Who is the protagonist of *The Matrix*?" "What is the climax of *Titanic*?" "To what genre does *Chinatown* belong?" These are completely acceptable teaching methods. No administrator or parent would think twice about teachers using films in this way, but if you replaced

those titles with *Final Fantasy X*, *Neverwinter Nights* and *F.E.A.R.*, someone would undoubtedly question your methods.

When all is said and done, though, the question remains as to how the answers: "Neo," "When the ship sinks" and "Drama" are any more correct and of any more value than the answers: "Tidus," "When Aribeth turns to evil" and "Horror/Suspense." Both sets of answers show that the students understood the meanings of the terms they have been taught, as well as the texts that they were presented with. Both sets of answers meet the desired outcomes and requirements to be of valid use in the classroom, yet only one has gained widespread acceptance.

The value of videogames in school is not limited strictly to the English classroom. Other "mainstream" games could be of use in other courses. The History classroom, for example, can be a frustrating place for some students. With lots of dates and specific details to learn, the subject can become dry and lifeless. Fortunately, History may be the course with the widest variety of entertaining games at its disposal.

From first-person shooters to real-time strategies, game after game has been created with history in mind, allowing players to take part in some of the biggest events of the past. The *Battlefield* series, for example, allows players to take part in real-world conflicts. *Battlefield: Vietnam* even makes good use of its loading screens, playing music of the period and giving players the historical information they need in order to understand the map they are about to play. Games like *Civilization* and *Age of Empires* offer players historical tidbits. By knowing the histories of the various peoples that are represented as playable civilizations, players can gain advantages over their opponents and tailor their choice of civilization to their personal playing style. Not only does a historical game contain information that would be useful in the classroom, but it also creates a system that rewards learning in a way that is hard to accomplish using text books.

Realistically, the widespread use of games in a classroom has obstacles that must be overcome before they can become a common teaching tool. The first is education. Teachers,

administrators and governments will need to come to see the benefits of this new teaching tool. The second is money. In a world of growing class sizes and shrinking budgets, it is unlikely that schools are going to pay for (or ask parents to pay for) licenses to these non-educational games en masse.

For now, teachers would be well advised to use these games on an individual level rather than using them as assignments for the whole class. An individual student with a passion for gaming might benefit enormously from the opportunity to put those skills to use for school. The bottom line is that students who enjoy their learning experience are more likely to do well in their classes than students who feel as though they are being force-fed information that has no real relevance to their everyday, technology-filled worlds.

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the escapist

NEWS BITS

Microsoft Launches Xbox 360; Gates Has No Plans of Stopping There
Microsoft launched their much anticipated Xbox 360 to much fanfare Tuesday, November 22, in the U.S. The first wave of units sold out immediately, leaving even those who preordered the machine without a device. New weekly shipments have been planned, but Microsoft has yet to reveal how many 360's those shipments will include.

Looking forward in an interview with Reuters, Bill Gates has said Microsoft has no plans to leave the console business. He goes on to say "We had no chance of being No. 1 [in 2001, when the first Xbox released]," but he believes the 360 will help Microsoft make up considerable ground in the race for console dominance.

Yahoo! and Xfire Closing in on Settlement
In January 2005, Yahoo! sued Xfire, a cross-game chat and stat tracking system, for infringing upon patents secured by Xfire's chief developers when they were employed by Yahoo! As of November 8, Xfire's legal team announced they planned on working with Yahoo! in order to settle out of court.

Xfire originally planned to ask the court for a summary judgment on the case, which would allow the judge to throw out the case if he felt Yahoo! didn't have any legal standing in the suit, but they rescinded those plans earlier this month. Last Wednesday, Xfire's team asked for more time to iron out a deal with Yahoo!

Casual Friday

CHECK BACK EVERY WEEKEND FOR ADDITIONAL CONTENT!
available NOW!

HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING
AND LOVE THE XBOX

by Joe Blancato

Ms. Dark, I Presume

The Xbox 360 is the first bona fide product of the New Gaming Age. It's the first gaming device created since the world awoke to the realization that gaming would usurp all other forms of entertainment as a cultural barometer. Beautiful People helped sell the 360 on MTV. Spielberg is designing games now. Peter Jackson actually had a hand in *King Kong*'s design, and he's kicking around the idea of abandoning movies forever, just to make games. This is the Great Media War's Lexington and Concord. And by God, the industry is damn proud of it.

It's really not hard to see. An untrained eye can take a look at *King Kong* and see where we're headed. But *King Kong* isn't what's going to really cement gaming's toehold on the hearts and minds of Western culture. If we want to get into Microsoft's head, see where they're going, we need not look at the 50-foot ape, but at the 5'9" redhead packing heat.

Joanna Dark is nothing less than a star from the future.

We've been given a heroine, the first icon of this new age, as suave as Sean Connery and as revolutionary as Thomas Paine. Joanna, when she's optioned into a Star Wars-sized franchise, will be the industry's first true leap into the newest American generation's pop culture. Movie stars will clamor to play her, and people other than Uwe Boll will vie for the rights to direct the film series. When your daughter dresses up as her on Halloween and your son wants her face on his lunchbox, you'll be able to tell them about the time it wasn't socially acceptable to talk to non-gamers about your marathon *Perfect Dark* parties.

And your children will ask, "Daddy, what's a gamer?" Because our culture will no longer be classified, because it's the only culture your ever know.

Try that on for a second - a world without gamers, because **everyone** is a gamer. No longer relegated to a socially awkward niche, gaming will rise to prominence over other entertainment media, overtaking its boring, non-interactive predecessors in market and mind share.

It's why the next generation consoles are being touted as home media devices. It's the easiest way to slip games into the other things Americans do for fun. Oh, you're going to watch *Taxi Driver* on DVD? Cool, the 360 can do that. Did you know there's another DeNiro flick on TCM? Why don't you TiVo it on your PS3's hard drive? Oh yeah, there's a game coming out, too. Guess what can play **that**.

They tried this approach with the home theater PC, but it didn't work, chiefly because people used to remotes and dropping DVDs into trays aren't going to put up with having to install multiple programs, just to be able to watch movies and record TV shows. While "computer people" - just like "car people" - take extreme pride in doing the impossible, be it rebuilding an engine from scratch or setting up a 15-hard-drive RAID, most people prefer it when things **just work**.

Enter the Xbox 360, the kinder, gentler version of the home theater PC. Now, your mom can enjoy the *Taxi Driver*/ Robert DeNiro smorgasbord of digestible entertainment, just by using her old

friend the remote control, and maybe by picking up a controller. And if you happen to own a Nintendo Revolution, she won't even have to adapt to a Wavebird.

Imagine that, fighting Mom for some face time with your favorite game character, who just so happens to be her favorite **movie character**. This hobby is never going to be the same again.

If regular games aren't enough, wait until Mom and Dad find the casual games hiding in Microsoft's online store. If they're not quite Old Grandma Hardcore yet, they can pay $6 and download *Gauntlet* from Microsoft's online store and smack 8-bit monsters with a sword until they have to go to your little sister's dance recital. *Bejeweled 2* is $10. As soon as office drones discover they can play at home in front of their TVs, the entire cube farm is going to collapse upon itself.

And just like that, a bastion of geek escapism is being dragged to the mainstream, and the people doing the dragging understand who's resisting them. It's you.

the escapist lounge

New this week!

Come kick back at the lounge, the brand spankin' new official blog for the magazine!

blog.escapistmagazine.com

The very act of separating yourself from pop culture makes you an enemy to the Cause, the grand design to elevate games beyond something geeks do for fun. In fact, by terming yourself other than a vanilla "consumer," you're harder to marry to other forms of entertainment than everyone else.

You're not a consumer, you're a **gamer**. You're **discerning**. You're done with entertainment you don't dictate; even TV with commercials slow you down. In the time it took you to watch a Depends commercial, you could have hit Amazon and ordered the full season DVD of the show you're watching.

What's more, you're pretty much immune to commercials. Members of the advertising industry are keenly aware of this. They've taken steps in the past (ilovebees) to get into your head in new ways. They can, and will, succeed in the future. They do so by preying on the more basic human revelries. Everyone loves a conspiracy, so ilovebees was born. Everyone loves sex; meet Joanna Dark. Everyone loves the idea of one small, inexpensive device performing the duties of multiple appliances; sounds like a tune the 360 and PS3 can hum.

What's funny about advertising appliances, though, is they really **do** provide a service to the customer. The 360 is just damn handy, if it happens to be what you're looking for. It's aesthetically pleasing, it's small and unassuming, and it'll do stuff with media the Jetsons never dreamed of. When it gets HD-DVD support, it'll be even more amazing.

Oh, and it plays games, too.

Goodbye, Gamer

The time for the gamer is rapidly winding down. Our future of glitz and glamour and social acceptance is now the present. And you've been so busy looking ahead, you didn't notice everyone else caught up. You're not a gamer anymore. Or, if you are, everyone is. You're stuck in terminology that's rapidly becoming outdated. That's right, you've come full-circle (360 degrees, in fact), and all your "gamer" moniker is doing is slowing down your progression toward hip, toward cool, toward defining the next version of "cool" or "hip."

Funny how that happened, huh? But don't act too surprised; we're not the first group to have the mainstream sneak up on us. Look back just 15 years. Those were good times if you lived anywhere near the Pacific Northwest. Then, some dumb band with an attractive, left-handed front man had to find a good studio, clean up the distortion a bit, and star in one of the best music videos ever. After Nirvana, grunge was never the same. **Music** was never the same. Our *Nevermind* isn't far away. When it comes to preparation, you have two options.

The first is to reject the new blood. But let's be honest, folks. The gaming community could stand a refreshing dip in the gene pool. We've got some pretty gnarly stereotypes to live down, ranging from the mostly harmless otaku/fanboy, to the disturbing basement-dwelling 40-year-old virgin who plays *EverQuest* into the night, to the cop-killing sociopath who uses computer games to hone his kitten-flaying skills. But we're **not** that, and this is our time to show the world what we are.

Our second - and really our only - option is to embrace the influx of newbies. Make your message boards homey, make them want to stay. Be nice to them on
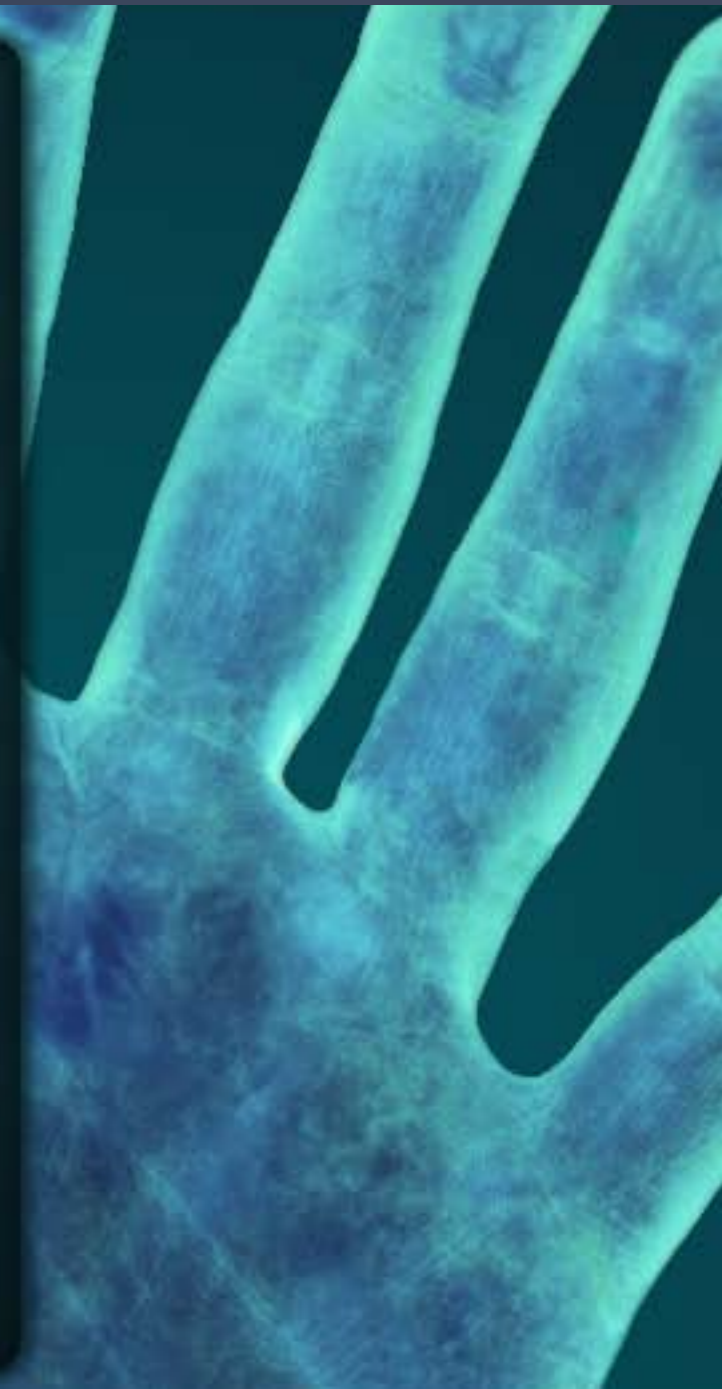
Xbox Live. Own them, but do it gracefully. The more people we invite into what we do, the better our chances of shedding predetermined stereotypes. And who knows, the flood of converts might bring the ratio of male to female gamers closer to 1:1, which will give us all the chance to create newbies of our own.

Abandoning the "gamer" nomenclature is all it takes to enter gaming nirvana. Thrice deny your history, and you're in. Spike your hair like Cloud and wear your pants like CJ. Then, you'll be one of the movers and shakers within pop culture's hive mind, dictating cool on any number of must-have gadgets that followed you from the esoteric realm of gamer to a mainstream dominated by people like you. People who knew what cool was long before it was cool. The question is, is that what you want?

Can you give up the culture? Or, more appropriately, can you give it over? Sure, it's a great concept. Being at the forefront of an entire nation's entertainment pulse is an experience most American gamers haven't experienced, unless they've spent time

in Japan. But can you stomach Cloud and Tifa sharing wall space with the Backstreet Boys?

What happens the first time you see a 13-year-old girl proclaim the new *Zelda* to be "ohmigod, the best ever!" when everyone knows *Ocarina of Time* is the pinnacle of the series, and forever will be? Or, God forbid, she'll find Vin Deisel's Agent 47 to be truly representative of the character, and "like, totally hot!" Heed my warning and prepare yourselves, you futureheads, because the vapidity of the teenybopper will soon be upon us. But look on the bright side: When that girl is 18, she'll probably want to sleep with you, because you-plus-five-years will be even cooler.

However, she's still part of the problem. She'll probably say *Final Fantasy XX* is better than *Final Fantasy VII*. She's representative of the Middle, those who subscribe to pop culture, but don't truly know it. Pop culture tends to be fickle, and people like our 13-year-old are the reason why. How many things are "the best ever" for six months, until the next iteration of the "best ever" comes along and blows the original out of the water?

Coffee House LAN Parties

But there is a light at the end of the pop culture tunnel. Since the status-quo's inception, countercultures have thrived, mashing a thumb into the mainstream's eye. That's where those of us unable to cope with "best evers!" can go to hide. We'll get to play our indie games, but they'll be even better. But how, in this time when the mainstream is threatening to strip us of the culture we've spawned, can independently developed games really thrive? As much as everyone likes to snipe the mainstream for its homogenous, money-chasing agenda, it can help people on the fringe.

> As much as everyone likes to snipe the mainstream for its homogenous, money chasing agenda, it can help people on the fringe.

First, more money floating around an industry means more will (and I **hate** to say this) "trickle down" to people at the bottom of the food chain; a few of those big budget producer types **do** remember their roots. The Weinsteins throw money at avant-garde directors when no one else is willing to finance them. SOE, god love 'em, buys MMOGs only a mother could love and gives them a place to clean up and try again. It's not exactly philanthropic, but big guys will subsidize little guys because when the little guys win awards, they thank the big guys in front of everyone.

Secondly, it gives us something to scoff at, to ridicule, to point at as an example of what **not** to do. Honestly, we're already there. Most of us were building *Katamari*s months before the big gaming press got wise. We look at *Katamari Damacy* and *Uplink* and *Fate* and wonder why EA can't get on the ball, and when it's obvious they never will, we laugh at the people who walk into Gamestop on *Madden*'s release day. *Madden* is just too mass market to be good, right? We've shifted to "indie rocker" out of divisive instinct. And you know what? Indie rockers are pretty cool. Indie gamers will be, too.

Hey! There's our new niche. Rather than hiding in basements and having same-sex LAN parties, we'll gather in non-Starbucks coffee houses wearing black leather and *Mario* t-shirts, using our XPS laptops' WiFi to chat in IRC with a group of people on the other side of the country doing the exact same thing. We'll prattle on about the philosophy of the next *Matrix* game while telling the groupies at the next table how, like, close we are to the house band, man. There will be DS2's in every pocket, and mobile game playing phones will ring out the underwater theme from the first *Mario Bros.* when someone gets a phone call.

It'll be grand.

Where We'll Be

No matter how successfully the 360 and its future inceptions draw us into the mainstream, there will still be purists in the culture willing to preserve whatever history we've written for ourselves. Perhaps they'll just be the next human generation of punks, kids who borrow their gamer parents' machines of antiquity to play *Fallout* or *Myst* or any of those other throwbacks to times when

games were games rife with a cultural ethos that long since evaporated from big budget titles. They'll be the first historians of the gaming age.

Our relics are in the shape of 5.25" floppies and aggressive message boards. Only after our children's inspection into our past will we ever be truly aware of what legacy we left behind, and what that legacy did to shape how the world has fun.

Joe Blancato is a Contributing Editor for The Escapist Magazine, in addition to being the Founder of waterthread.org.

We've shifted to "indie rocker" out of divisive instinct.

Supplanting Reality
Are Virtual Friends as Good as Real Ones?
by Tim Stevens

At first, I had a hard time telling my friends about my new puppies. I was genuinely excited when I picked them out of the litter, and I had a lot of fun trying to train them. Sure, puppies aren't the most obedient things, but even when they're disobeying you it's hard not to smile. Despite the smiles, I was still reluctant to talk about them. It wasn't because of the geeky names I'd chosen for them (my German Shepherd pup was named Peach, while I called my baby boxer Bowser), and it wasn't because my friends were all cat people. Nor were they traumatized by wet puppy noses as children. It was, in fact, because my landlord didn't allow dogs, because Peach and Bowser didn't really exist, and because I didn't want my friends to think I was crazy.

My pets, of course, lived in the world of *Nintendogs*, Nintendo's surprise phenomenon "game" that gives everyone, even gamers who've had their attention spans chiseled away to nil, the chance to raise abbreviated dogs. You wouldn't call *Nintendogs* a pet-raising simulator, because real puppies don't leave the floor nice and clean if you ignore them for a few hours, real puppies don't simply get more sleepy if you haven't fed them for a few days, and real puppies don't place first in a Frisbee championship after four hours of training. However, it does give you a taste of dog ownership.

It's all these simplifications and accelerations when compared to real doggie life that make this an entertaining game and, to some degree, make it sound an awful lot like Bandai's global sensation Tamagotchi pocket eggs, which enabled gamers to care for a fat, little, pixilated alien. However, the roots of this genre of game date back long before the first trendy digital devices, back before there were any digital devices at all - back to the first dolls.

Now, playing *Nintendogs* isn't exactly the same as changing the diaper on a Baby Pee-Pee Pants doll, but the similarities are there. Both require a modicum of the same care and attention of the real thing, while neither delivers quite the same level of negative feedback should you slack off on your duties. Your doll certainly isn't going to die on you, and neither are your digital puppies … in fact, they just run away if you aren't holding up your end of the bargain. Most importantly, though, both deliver a small taste of the satisfaction and reward of raising the real thing.

But can you really get attached to a replica? Can you really fall in love with a puppy that exists only in polygons, or some other digital reinterpretation of something **real**? Earlier this year, when Mark Allen of the *New York Times* spent a few days at home with Nuvo, a funny little robot from Japan with little practical purpose beyond companionship, he found himself quite enamored with the little … guy? Doll? Toy? Gizmo? "When Nuvo's four-day visit ended," he said, "I felt oddly alone. I miss its weird, nonverbal companionship, the small ways it entertained me. Sometimes I look around the room, hoping to witness one of its mechanical flubs, so strangely reminiscent of a lover's emotional outbursts."

If Mark's feelings are anything to go by, yes, you certainly can get quite attached to something that isn't alive. I myself found that while poking at Peach or Bowser with a stylus wasn't nearly as rewarding as scratching the belly of a real puppy, it was satisfying in its own way, enough to make the pains of a forced dogless life at home a little more bearable. I was initially reluctant to buy the game, thinking it would only make me long for a **real** puppy more. However, *Nintendogs* created quite the opposite effect, more or less reducing the perceived need. I got a taste of dog

…can you really get attached to a replica?

ownership while suffering virtually none of the drawbacks; I could play with and train my pups whenever I got a chance, and if I needed to turn them off for a day or two, they were still happy to see me when I turned them back on and called their names.

So maybe digital avatars can give a sense of friendship or companionship, but what about more deep seeded longings? Can games address those, too, and to some degree, assuage them? In Japan, at least, there's compelling evidence that they can. Think of the incredible popularity of dating sims among Japanese gamers. There are hundreds of romantic video games there that feature nothing more explicit than a modest bathing suit or more titillating than a kiss on the cheek, yet they sell like hotcakes, and their success extends far beyond the games themselves. Players genuinely become attached to the characters they're trying to digitally woo, spending their salaries on figurines and posters depicting them, even dressing up like them; trying to make them real. These games give some small outlet and feeling of connection for shy, reclusive gamers who otherwise would

have none. Whether it's a healthy connection is another topic altogether.

There are more materialistic desires that videogames can help to assuage as well. It's often been said that it takes a large fortune to make a small one in motor racing, and while that hasn't stopped many filthy rich people from pilfering away their future heirs' inheritance on the track, not everyone has a large fortune to start with. Whether you like it light and easy like Polyphony's *GT4* or hard and raw like SimBin's *GTR*, driving sims offer varying degrees of difficulty and realism to suit different levels of personal achievement - and do it at a ridiculously miniscule cost when compared to the real thing.

Online racing leagues take the realistic physics of driving sims and mix in the unpredictable behavior of humans, creating a surprisingly authentic-tasting cocktail of adrenaline and pressure. Screw up and crash into the leader and you can be sure you've ruined some real human being's night. Get pushed into the wall, yourself, and the money you'll need to fix the repairs won't be real, but the feelings of frustration and disappointment will be. So, too, will be

...what about more deep seeded longings?

the feelings of exhilaration should you get the win.

So, at least in certain circumstances, virtual or otherwise non-living things can help to ease the longings to follow a dream one might suffer, thanks to a lack of money, a lack of charisma to attract a mate or simply a lack of time to do anything of substance. These replications can give you some sort of feeling of emotional connection, and while nobody would argue that these replica

sensations come anywhere near the power of the real thing, these substitutes have one major advantage: They work on our schedule.

As civilization becomes more advanced and the idea of a nine-to-five work day becomes more and more quaint, people's lives are beginning to happen in smaller increments. Someone who really wants to own and train a puppy to become a championship Frisbee-catcher would need to make a major commitment to

the dog, teaching it everything from its name all the way up to exactly when to jump to make that leaping catch. This commitment of time and money would need to take priority over most other aspects of the owner's life. Certainly, there are plenty of people for whom this model works, but for many of today's young and even not-so-young professionals, that kind of thing just doesn't jive.

So, is it better to make the full commitment, to spend the full time and money, to change your life so that you can reap the full rewards of your passion? Or, is it better to go the virtual route, to keep your crazy and hectic life, but to enjoy your irregularly scheduled moments of time with your virtual pup, cel-shaded girlfriend or digitized Ferrari? While their convenience and easy appeal

is alluring, it's all too easy to fall out of love with a mesh of polygons or circuitry when the next big thing comes along. But, some folks simply don't have a choice in the matter. Ultimately, a real pup doesn't have a power button but, when he puts his head on your lap while you're typing away on your computer, you might just feel OK about putting the work aside for 30 minutes and going for a bit of a walk … for your dog's sake, of course. 🖼

Tim Stevens is a freelance gaming journalist. His work can be seen online at Yahoo! Videogames (videogames.yahoo. com) and the Global Gaming League (www.ggl.com), in print in metro.pop (www.metrodotpop.com) and Phuze (www.phuze.com) magazines, and on TV on G4's X-Play (www.g4tv.com).

MEET THE TEAM

Each week we ask a question of our staff and featured writers to learn a little bit about them and gain some insight into where they are coming from. This week's question is:

"What's the largest amount of people you have had in your house who were there specifically to play videogames? What game/platform?"

Jon Wood, "Gaming for Grades"
My place has never really been videogame central, but I can think of one time in-particular that there were four or five of us gathered around the PS2. I had spent (too many) hours making Create a Wrestlers of my friends in Smackdown!: Here Comes the Pain. There's something extremely satisfying about watching your digital friends beat the tar out of each other. Always a good time!

Mark Wallace, "Theory of the Gaming Class"
I recently invited two non-gaming friends over, both 40-ish professionals, to show them GTA: San Andreas on the PS2. These were the kind of guys who pooh-pooh gaming as a waste of time. Very soon, though, it was as if we were back in high school and had gotten high after class. They were immediately and uproariously involved.

Bonnie Ruberg, "Videogames, Pornography, and the Question of Interactivity"
I try and keep my gaming circles relatively small, but my brother did once hold an in-house Dance Dance Revolution party (PlayStation 1) with about 25 sweaty teenagers and no open windows. That definitely felt like a home invasion.

Tim Stevens, "Supplanting Reality"
Well, I just bought my house last week, so the literal answer is zero. However, if we factor in apartments and dorm rooms and the like, I think six people came over once to check out Dance Dance Revolution. Everybody laughed … until it was their turn. Most haven't been back since.

Allen Varney, "Game Design in the Transfigured World"
Oh man, my house party where four dozen gamers got their first taste of

Dance Dance Revolution was, shall we say, memorable. I'd set up the PS2 game and dancemats in the second floor library. Some of those players were overweight, yet vigorous; I was afraid the floor would collapse. That party probably took ten years off the life of my house…

Joe Blancato, Contributing Editor
Looking back, it was definitely the eight-man marathon games of WCW Nitro on the n64. We'd play four-player Royal Rumbles with teams of two switching back and forth after ringouts.

JR Sutich, Contributing Editor
Twelve. We had three Xboxes set up with system link in my living room and multiplayer binged for an entire weekend.

Julianne Greer, Executive Editor
Somewhere around 15 for Dance Dance Revolution or Karaoke Revolution at parties. Yes, multiple events. No, they don't always start out that way. It just seems that after a couple of dirty martinis or Pirate's Teas (Yarrr!) these things happen. Ask JR about singing Madonna.